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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes seven "truths" imparted about male sex traits and sex-role stereotypes that stem from extant research reflecting primarily a dual-culture perspective. The paper includes relevant research findings and insights from male students that suggest that some of the conclusions about men's communication should be revisited. The presumed truths are: (1) men listen for facts and not feelings; (2) women are presumed to be the intimacy experts; (3) male friendships are rooted in sharing activities while female friendships are rooted in dialogue; (4) assumptions about men's self-disclosure and friendships are based, in part, on what men talk about; (5) when sexual harassment on college campuses is addressed, the focus tends to be on women as victims because of their presumed powerlessness in the professor/student relationship; (6) male students are told of the enormous benefits that will accrue to those who share equally in the household and childcare responsibilities; and (7) men wield the power in society. The conclusions are that teachers need to scrutinize the "truths" imparted to students and identify the male populations being taught and the point in their lives at which educators encounter them. Contains 33 references. (NKA)

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Male Communication Problems in the Student Body

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Prior to enrolling in communication courses, the majority of male students at my institution assume that they communicate effectively in their interpersonal relationships. They haven't given much thought to how their communication may be construed by others. Most have spent the last several years coping with problems of adolescence: worrying about their bodies and their social relationships; dealing with crises in their families; achieving the grades required for college admissions; and finding ways to fund their education. However, when they enroll in communication courses that address, for example, gender, listening, conflict management and so on, they are often confronted with an additional challenge. To add to their woes they discover that all is not right with the world--with their world--leading writers like John Gray (1992) to conclude that men are not from this planet and that to improve our relationships with them, we need to understand how Martians think.

For the purposes of this discussion, I will summarize seven "truths" we impart about Martians' sex-trait and sex-role stereotypes that stem from extant research reflecting primarily a dual-culture perspective. Along with each of these truths, I will include relevant research findings along with insights from my male students that suggest we ought to revisit some of our conclusions about men's communication.

Presumed Truths About Martians' Behavior

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1. Men listen for facts and not feelings. Moreover, because their affective listening behavior does not conform to the stereotype of the empathic listener, men are "probably" responsible when one partner is accused of not listening (Beck, 1988; Borisoff and Hahn, 1997; Gilligan, 1982; Maltz and Borker, 1982; Rubin, 1983; Tannen, 1990; 1994). What is often marginalized in discussions on listening is the influence of self-esteem and perceived status on the ability to listen effectively (Daly, 1990; Snodgrass, 1992). What we fail to question are the following: Can we assume that the "performance" of certain cues means that an individual is truly listening and that the absence of these cues implies the opposite? Ought we perpetuate the belief that there is only one way to construe and to demonstrate empathy? And, since we are not mind readers, to what extent should communicators be responsible for indicating the kind of empathic listening they need, that is, it would be helpful to know whether the individual with whom we are interacting needs to vent, wants an objective opinion, is seeking advice, would like encouragement, or just needs a hug.

2. Women, according to the extant literature, are presumed to be the intimacy experts (Bem, 1993; Haste, 1994; Hatfield and Rapson, 1993; Rubin, 1983). Because men, we are told, are discouraged from revealing their true feelings, they are probably responsible when their partner accuses them of not wanting to be close. Men's inability to identify and express their inner feelings now has a name: a disease called Alexithymia (meaning

"without words") (Levant, 1996). Before we diagnose our male students with this affliction, however, we ought not to ignore the recent findings suggesting that sex differences in self-disclosure in dyadic interaction may be exaggerated (Dindia and Allen, 1992). It is suggested, moreover, that we expand the contexts in which we study self-disclosure before we conclude that men are deficient in this area (Borisoff and Hahn, 1995; Duck, 1993; Wood and Inman, 1993).

3. Male friendships are rooted in sharing activities while female friendships are rooted in dialogue. Implicit in this assumption is that men's friendships are more superficial, less rewarding and less intimate than women's friendships. Before we lead our male students to conclude that they are doomed to lonely and impoverished lives, we ought to consider the striking similarities in male-male and female-female bonding as articulated by Chris Inman (1996) and Fern Johnson (1996). Their respective essays conclude that mutual caring, understanding, trust, loyalty, enjoyment and the need to connect are characteristic of same-sex friendships and that former assumptions about male friendships may have been based largely on stereotypes rather than on reality.

4. Assumptions about men's self-disclosure and friendships are based, in part, on what men talk about. Much has been written to suggest that the topics they discuss (including money, work and sports) aren't considered "personal" (Aries, 1987; Wood and Inman, 1993). Yet as many of the men in my classes observe, because they have been raised to measure their self-worth against

their professional and monetary achievements, these topics ought not be considered "trivial"; for them, these issues are extremely personal, important and relevant to their self-esteem.

5. When sexual harassment on college campuses is addressed, the focus tends to be on women as victims because of their presumed powerlessness in the professor/student relationship and because of women's presumed lesser power within the culture (Bingham, 1996; Gill, 1993; Kramarae, 1992; Payne, 1993). Although some studies indicate that male students are targets of harassing behavior (albeit less frequently), because men's attitudes about sexuality may lead them to misconstrue sexual harassment as sexual advances and consequently not to report these occurrences, there is a tendency in the literature and in classroom discussion to focus on women's experiences and framing strategies (Clair, 1992; Clair et al. 1993).

Certainly it is important to continue scrutinizing how women's and men's behavior and how cultural power imbalances may contribute to perpetuating sexual harassment and to find mechanisms to alter this climate. However, if we fail to acknowledge the experiences of male targets of sexual harassment, we are complicit in legitmating the perception that they do not have the right to give their violations a voice.

Relatedly we caution men to take great care in how they interpret women's behavior lest they be accused of misinterpreting (and acting on) signs of affiliation, friendship and even flirtation as genuine romantic or sexual interest. Although men are the presumed arbiters of social power in the

initiation and development of romantic relationships, women retain the power of granting or denying sex (Borisoff and Hahn, 1995; Keen, 1991). While these distinctions may have fueled how we present our bodies as symbolic markers of attraction or as expressions of power relations (Binghman, 1996; Turner, 1994) on college campuses nationwide, workshops for male students hold them responsible for deciphering cues, for distinguishing mixed-messages, and for being cognizant that these messages may vary from woman to woman. Thus male students have the unique and dubious distinction of potentially being a victim of sexual harassment as well as a perpetrator of harassing behavior.

6. We tell our male students of the enormous benefits that will accrue to those who share equally in the household and child-care responsibilities. We have new names for these relationships: "collaborative couples" (Barnett and Rivers, 1996) and "peer marriages" (Gabor, 1995). In theory the prospect of sharing equally in earning capacity and becoming fully involved parents and partners may appear attractive. However, for the majority of the students, there are several challenges that make these goals difficult to envision in their own lives. One challenge is that we have not yet arrived at the point in society where we have dissassociated male identity (and success) from their professional identities (and economic success). As long as their families, their culture, and they themselves connect approval, worth, and achievement with their future in the sphere of work, the pressure to devote their efforts primarily in this domain will remain compelling.

A second, and related challenge male students face is the implicit assumption in the social relationships they forge that men are still expected to earn more than their female partners. To the extent that many women are complicit in connecting male attractiveness in part to professional and economic prowess (what we call "ambition"), they are perpetuating the pressure on the men in their lives to retain their role as "provider."

Finally, although the Family and Medical Leave Act now gives men the "right" to become more involved in the homefront, because equating male identity with work is so deeply embedded, the potential repercussions for being perceived as putting family life first may make men "even more nervous" about challenging cultural values (Span, 1995, p. 56).

Redefining social roles for women and for men is fraught with difficulty. However, in recent years I have observed a transformation in how students respond to a discussion of these issues. When the women in my classes articulate that they foresee their future roles as primarily that of a wife and a parent, even those who do not envision these roles in their own lives support this decision as their choice. However, when the men in my classes express that they envision their future role primarily as a provider for their family, often they are greeted with derision: they are accused of "imposing" their views and of perpetuating male dominance.

7. The final truth we impart to our students is that men wield the power in society. According to Nancy Henley and Cheris Kramarae (1994), the extant theories of male/female

miscommunication (female deficit, dual cultures, social difference, psychological difference, faulty linguistic systems, cross-sex "pseudocommunication") obscure "problems that arise from unequal power rather than from communication" (p. 403). We inform our students about the legacy of male power, of embedded patriarchal systems, of the androcentric lens of gender through which we view the world. We report findings of studies on verbal, vocal and nonverbal behaviors conducted in our field, oftentimes mapping intentionality onto the results. We do so, moreover, while we have yet to resolve ourselves the significance and salience of the dual-culture perspective, the gender similarities view, and standpoint theory on our discipline.

If we talk with our male students, really talk with and not at them, we may learn that they emerge from many of their classes feeling that they are targets: they are made to feel guilty for the sins of their forebears which have been revisited on them; they are held both accountable and responsible for their present and future relationships. What we may also learn by talking with them is that at this point in their lives, the majority of the men in our classes do not see themselves as especially privileged or powerful. For them, their professors wield the power of the grade, their parents hold the power of the tuition check, prospective employers and graduate admissions offices hold the power of acceptance, the women they hope to date wield the power of rejection. Other male students see themselves marginalized for different reasons: the African-American and Latino students observe that this presumed power may apply to White males--their

own experiences suggest that such power does not belong to them. For many of the male students from Pacific Rim nations, the concept of "power" vis-a-vis communication and expected roles is a foreign concept to them: many of their choices are informed by "obedience" and "respect." And many of the gay students observe that this presumed power applies to heterosexual males and not to them. Often they feel compelled to keep "who they are" a secret from their families and employers.

In light of these divergent construals of male power, dominance and privilege, it is important not only to scrutinize the "truths" we impart to our students, but that we also identify the male populations we teach and acknowledge the point in their lives at which we encounter them. If we fail to do so, can we blame the martians for wanting to retreat into Gray's metaphoric cave, never again wanting to re-emerge?

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